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ABSTRACT

A discussion of reading instruction for limited-English-proficient (LEP) students looks at elements contributing to development of an effective instructional approach. The elements discussed include the following: the quality of reading materials; role of oral language development; design of an initial decoding process geared to success; need to make reading relevant to the students' own lives; and incorporation of parents in the literacy process. Drawing on the theories and work of Paulo Freire, the discussion proposes the use of dialogues to develop an interactive reading process aimed at the empowerment of students. The approach attempts to validate each student's own feelings and previous experiences and to develop critical thinking skills and problem-solving attitudes that help shape reality. A brief bibliography is included. (Author/MSE)

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CREATIVE READING
A RELEVANT METHODOLOGY FOR LANGUAGE MINORITY CHILDREN

Alma Flor Ada

This article deals with elements that contribute to the development of an effective approach to the teaching of reading to language minority students within the context of critical pedagogy. The elements discussed are: the quality of the reading materials, the role of oral language development, the design of an initial decoding process geared to success, the need to make reading relevant to the students' own lives, and the incorporation of parents in the literacy process. Drawing on the theories and work of Paulo Freire, it proposes the use of dialogues to develop an interactive reading process aimed at the empowerment of students. It attempts to validate each student's own feelings and previous experiences and to develope critical thinking skills and problem-solving attitudes that can help shape reality.

Traditionally, reading, like listening, has been characterized as a receptive aspect of communication, in contrast to the productive aspects, speaking and writing. This characterization tends to promote the teaching of reading as a passive endeavor, in which the reader receives the information provided by the text. Consequently, the emphasis is placed on reading comprehension, interpreted as the ability to accurately repeat what the text says. But reading can also be understood as a highly creative act, a dialogue between reader and text, in which the reader not only brings to the text his or her experiences, values and beliefs but engages in an active --albeit internal and silent-- dialogue with the text. This leads to a critical analysis of the text and the drawing of motivation and information from it aides in the reader's quest to decode and transform, his or her world.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze ways in which reading can be taught as a creative process and ways in which reading can be given a new relevance for students who might otherwise fail to develop enduring literacy skills.

Reading, a basic aspect of education, warrants special attention, for most of the information students receive and are tested on is in written form. The common practice has been to divide the reading process into a number of isolated skills placed along a continuum, scope and sequence. The assumption is that the various skills must be mastered sequentially. Thus,

students are moved from readiness or prereading skills to word attack skills, and then on to literal comprehension skills. Only when these are mastered will inferential skills be introduced. Critical thinking, problem solving, and creative skills are restricted to those children who have managed to reach the upper reading levels.

Unfortunately, many children do not attain these levels. In many classrooms, children begin to fail in kindergarten and they "fall below the norm" in first grade. They are condemmed as not being sufficiently good, bright, or capable by a system that imposes external norms, that presupposes to know what every child should learn or do at a given time. Children are told that they do not have the capacity to suceed when they receive prereadiness skills pages, phonix exercises or engage in activities which do not reflect actual reading.

An alternative approach to reading, in which the goal is to have children read with pleasure, ease, assurance, freedom, and enthusiasm, should have these five essentials.

- The materials should be interesting, to awaken the children's desire to read.

- The children's oral language development should be continuously fostered through the reading process.

- The method selected for teaching initial reading should be geared to success, instilling in the children confidence in their ability to learn.

- The reading process should be immediately meaningful. It should be relevant both to their real world and to the process of effecting positive changes in that world.

- Parents should be actively involved in the process.

What follows is an analysis of each of those five elements within the context of the Creative Reading Method (Ada, 1980; Ada and Olave, 1986).

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The Quality of the Reading Materials.

Materials of the highest quality are essential to a successful reading process. The materials must be well written, handsomely illustrated, and engaging. Every child has a right to the best. Because children reared in poverty are usually deprived of aesthetic, uplifting experiences, our minority children have an even greater need for beautiful materials.

Aesthetics has been a significant human force. All cultures, at all times, have had a thirst for beauty, which they have expressed in a multitude of ways: buildings, clothing, and artifacts have had both a utilitarian and an aesthetic value. Only with the servitude imposed by feudalism and during the industrial revolution was the pursuit of beauty totally subjugated to the demands of utilitarianism. One of the negative consequences of consumerism is that it has helped distort and destroy people's aesthetic sensibility, making them want to purchase and possess objects lacking in practical as well as aesthetic value.

One of the charges that might be leveled against today's American schools is that they have given up on aesthetics as a common good to which all children are entitled. Modern technology has made it possible for everyone to appreciate works of art through recordings, slides, videocassettes, reproductions, and to have access to the best examples of beauty in all cultures. However, these are being denied to schoolchildren who have no other opportunity of being exposed to them. Schools have become bleak and ugly. There is a belief that most children would not be interested in, would not accept, or would even be repelled by the fine arts.

We know that a positive attitude and a feeling of well- being are highly conducive to learning. We also know, as has been demonstrated in the suggestopedia studies (Pollack, 1979), that some classical music helps foster that feeling of well- being, that receptiveness to learning. Yet very little, if anything, is being done to take advantage of fine art and good music as means of creating a more pleasant, more learning- receptive environment in our schools.

In the teaching of reading, we have the opportunity to select the best of children's literature --books that combine an attractive format and handsome illustrations with good writing, that make effective use of humor, are designed to make reading enjoyable.

Oral Language Development and Reading.

The ample and varied research in reading has produced few conclusive statements. Yet there does seem to be agreement on one factor as having a significant correlation with success in reading. This factor is that the children who tend to achieve greater success in reading are those who have good oral language development, and those to whom parents read aloud frequently. By and large, these happen to be precisely the same children.

This finding poses a very special challenge. Schools that are in place only to perpetuate existing inequalities will use this finding to support the thesis that minority children fail because of their inherent limitations. Those who believe that the underlying reason for education is to provide that which otherwise would not be available will recognize the need to develop the children's oral language as a basis for success in reading, as well as for its own sake. They will also see the need to establish reading aloud to children as an essential part of the reading process.

Teachers must assist students in the process of developing the totality of their human potential, in becoming truly active agents of their own lives, capable of determining their future and of transforming dreams into reality. Therefore, it is necessary to analyze the orientation of classroom activities and attitudes.

If the children are to develop the skills that will prepare them for leadership roles, they need opportunities to talk, to question, to debate, to share experiences, and to express their opinions. They also need opportunities to write. As the great Latin American thinker Jose Marti said, "To learn to read is to take a step forward; to learn to write is to take a step upward."

There is a correlation between children's oral language development and their reading ability. The greater their store of oral language, the more likely they will come to grips with a book, to understand it, and to make the predictions necessary for smooth reading. It is therefore extremely important to work toward the development of children's oral language skills.

In light of the above-mentioned linguistic principles, such development is achieved mainly through the meaningful use of language. Every time the occasion arises, children should be spoken to and encouraged to speak. They need language development models. Just as newly born babies begin to learn

their language because their parents speak to them, regardless of whether or not they can understand what is said, school-age children need models that speak unfamiliar words, for this is how they will learn those words. Similiarly a mother does not explain to her baby every word she utters but, instead, uses words in a meaningful context and thus teaches them to the baby, children should also be spoken and read to in a language that is rich and abundant. There is no need to stop and explain every word. Hearing them in a meaningful context, children will add unfamiliar words to their vocabulary.

Children's literature and folklore can be of enormous help. The simple poems, tongue twisters, riddles, and cumulative tales found in folklore are easy to remember because of their frequent use of rhythm and rhyme. Songs are an excellent means of developing vocabulary and syntax, for adding music to rhythm and rhyme fosters retention. What better language development exercise than a song a day! Besides, songs help allay anxiety, which works against learning. They also create a cheerful classroom atmosphere which is conducive to any learning task.

Introduction to the Reading Process

There has been a very long feud over reading methods. Traditionally, educators have joined one of two opposing camps: advocating phonetic methods or defending sight-reading approaches.

In itself, the feud reflects one of the serious problems facing American schooling: the pendulum effect. For the most part, schools entirely abandon one method in favor of a new one, which eventually will also be replaced, sometimes returning to a modified version of the previous one. Teachers resent this process because they often find themselves forced into adopting a method they do not necessarily feel comfortable with, only to have to abandon it when they are beginning to master it. In the interest of progress, the pendulum might better be replaced by a spiral, for this allows advancement to be made by carrying the best of a given process to a new level, with a new twist.

At first glance, the two opposing methods have both good and bad points. The phonetic method, on on hand, is economical. After mastering a limited number of sounds and sound combinations, children are able to decode an almost unlimited number of words. It also recognizes the basic structures of the language. Its disadvantages are that: 1) it works with artificial language, 2) children are drilled in producing and recognizing

sounds in isolation, quite apart from their language experience; and 3) the process of learning something that has little to do with actual reading often leads to frustration.

The sight-reading approach, on the other hand, utilizes more natural language and therefore awakens more interest on the part of the children. Unfortunately, this process is slower, depending on the memorization of whole words, and some children are unable to make the transition to decoding new words.

Outside these two mainstream approaches, the language experience method, in which the children dictate and read their own productions, is perhaps the best possible individual approach to reading. Unfortunately, it has not yet had the widespread application it deserves.

Another method, proposed by Paulo Freire (1982a), has been used very successfully for adult literacy. It utilizes a whole word or phrase that will be remembered because of its implications to the group as a generative word, a word to be divided into syllables which, will be used to create new words. This approach suggests the possibility of a syncretic method, that is, a method which takes the best from the phonetic and the sight-reading approaches.

The development of a syncretic reading method in Spanish is aided by the correlation between sound and symbol in Spanish syllables. Producing highly motivating and engaging readings, with a limited number of syllables requires a good deal of creativity. The syncretic method has the advantage of being economical: after mastering each new set of five syllabic combinations, the children incorporate a large number of words to their reading vocabulary. More important, it is a method geared to success. The children have the opportunity to constantly reinforce that which they already know (sets of syllabic combinations) --not by reading the same words (which would be monotonous), but rather by encountering the same syllables in new words. By never presenting the syllables in isolation, by always basing the text on natural, everyday language, and by creating high-interest stories enhanced by good art, it is possible to offer the children a syncretic approach to Spanish reading.

It is important not to confuse the syncretic method with the "eclectic" approaches, which incorporates, at random, elements from the phonetic and the sight-reading approaches and which seem to abound in recent reading programs. The syncretic method is systematic. It carefully controls the introduction of new words formed by known syllabic combinations.

Moreover, because it is inspired in Freire's (1982a) methodology, it uses dialogue to make those words highly significant to the children and to guarantee their retention. The use of rhyme, rhythm, and humor helps facilitate decoding and remembering words.

The Reading Process

Burdened with economic and social problems, insecure about their ethnic identity, and insufficiently equipped with oral language skills, minority students continue to fail in reading when this is presented mechanistically, as a passive, receptive process.

Because the children we are concerned with come from homes where reading is not a daily practice, it is imperative to provide a meaning for the reading process such that the children can readily perceive it. Since these children are immersed in a world of poverty and dissatisfaction, it is essential that they perceive reading not only as relevant to their present reality but as a mean of effecting positive changes in that reality.

The Creative Reading Method proposes that reading be introduced, from the start, as a holistic process, whose relevance goes beyond the transmission of the information provided by the text. A true reading act is an interactive dialogue with the information set forth in the text. In the Creative Reading Method, children are exposed to the complexity of this dialogue even before they are able to recognize words or letters. That is, the reading process is initiated through either the reading of wordless picture stories, or the listening of read-to stories. The story then becomes the basis for the dialogue, but it is not the end-only the beginning.

For the sake of exposition, the four phases have been given names and will be discussed separately, although in a creative reading act they may happen concurrently and be interwoven.

Descriptive Phase

In this initial phase the children learn what the text (or an illustration) says. Traditionally, this is where reading begins and ends; here it is only the beginning. Appropriate questions might be along these lines: What happened? Where, when, and how did it happen? Who did it? Why?

These are the usual reading comprehension questions and, for the most

part, the only ones asked of beginning readers. They are questions whose answers can be found in the text, are known by the teacher, and indicate whether or not the children have understood and can recall the information given them. Such questions are undoubtedly important, but they are not enough. A discussion that stays at this level suggests that reading is a passive, receptive, and, in a sense, domesticating process.

Personal Interpretive Phase

Once the information has been presented, the children are encouraged to weigh it against their own experiences, feelings, and emotions. This step is extremely important. It fosters the reading process by bringing it within the children's grasp and thus making it more meaningful. It helps develop the children's self-esteem by showing that their experiences and feelings are valued by both the teacher and their classmates. Moreover, it helps the children understand that true learning occurs only when the information received is analyzed in the light of one's own experiences and emotions.

Much has been said about the need for affective instruction that recognizes the emotional needs of minority children. Unfortunately, the affective component is often considered peripheral, not truly essential to the learning process. The Creative Reading Method, on the other hand, stresses recognition of each child's individuality as an integral part of that process. Clearly, as the children's own experiences are being validated, so too are those of their family and community. Cultural validation is not something that is superimposed or added on, but forms part of the very core of the process.

Questions appropriate to this second phase might be: Do you know of (or have you seen, felt, experienced) something like this? Have you ever (done, felt, thought, wanted) something similar? How is what you saw (did) different from what happened in the story? What would you have done (said, thought)? What about your family? Friends? How did you feel after reading that? Did you like it? Dislike it? Did it worry you? Made you happy? Frightened you?

A better understanding of one's self, and of others, is an added benefit of this part of the dialogue. The respect shown by others for one's personal experiences helps increase one's self- esteem.

Critical Phase

Once the children have compared and contrasted what is presented in the reading with their personal experiences, they are ready to move on to a critical analysis, to the level of generalized reflection.

The questions asked at this level will help the children draw inferences about the information presented: Is what happened valid? Always? When? Is it always necessary? Does it benefit everyone alike? Or does it favor some at the expense of others? Does everyone accept it? Are there any alternatives to this situation? What are these alternatives? What do they depend on? Would people of a different culture (class, sex) have acted differently? How? Why?

The analysis is, of course, determined by the children's level of maturity and previous experience. Yet let no one think that young children cannot adopt a critical attitude. On the contrary, critical thinking is a process that can and should get underway very early, though naturally in terms of that which is familiar to the children.

Creative Phase

The goal of the Creative Reading Method is not met with the awakening of the children's critical awareness as a mere intellectual exercise. Rather, the process is completed only when the children can draw on it in order to make decisions regarding the world around them. That is, once the children have received the information, compared and contrasted it with their own feelings and experiences, and arrived at a critical analysis, they will feel that their self-affirmation is such that they are in a position to make decisions for improving and enriching their lives.

The dialogue at this phase is aimed at helping the children discover aspects of their lives that they can improve and encouraging them to make decisions with that purpose in mind. Of course, it is not a question of the children changing the entire world, but of changing their own world, by beginning to assume responsibility for their own lives and for their relations with others.

Parental Involvement

The reasons why language minority children in the United States may be somewhat slow to acquire oral language skills are generally thought to include the following:

- The displacement of the nuclear family (parents and children) and the separation from the extended family (grandparents, uncles and aunts), thus lessening child/ adult interaction.

- The absence of one parent from the home, or the need for both parents to work outside the home, thus reducing not only the time but also the quality of the attention that parents can make available to their children.

- The relatively low levels of literacy and schooling of many parents.

Yet there is another reason for the lag in the acquisition of oral language skills, even more prevalent and detrimental than those given above:

- Parents and children alike perceive the home language as being less important than English and have the mistaken notion that the best way to learn English is to give up the home language.

Parents who hold to that idea reflect the natural desire of all parents to have their children use language well. Their very human attitude is deeply rooted in the unconscious. Their mistake lies not in wanting their children to speak English well but in thinking that turning away from one's first language makes it easier to acquire a second. Yet, all the evidence indicates that the opposite is true. Surprising as it may be to some, the best way for a language minority child to truly master English is to master the home language well (Cummins, 1981).

The skills required for mastering a language are basic and general, and are unrelated to the specific language (English, Spanish, French, etc.) in which they are applied. If children develop second language skills in their first language, those skills will lay the groundwork for acquiring and perfecting the second language. Furthermore, if children do not fully develop language skills in their first language, this limitation can adversely affect not

only their cognitive growth but also the acquisition of higher language skills in their second language.

Aside from serving as the basis for children's cognitive growth and for their acquisition of a second language, there are other equally important reasons for first language development.

Some of these reasons are sociocultural:

- Only by using their home language will children be able to fully relate to their culture and come into possession of the cultural heritage that is theirs.

- Mastery of two languages is useful and valuable in its own right.

- The society of the United States needs bilingual people in order to maintain relations with the non-English speaking countries of this hemisphere.

There are also psychological reasons:

- A person's psychological strength is derived from his or her self-concept. One's home language is a part of one's personal identity. Renouncing that language is tantamount to renouncing a part of oneself, and this is harmful to a positive self-image.

- Emotional well-being is linked to interpersonal communication, to family relationships, and to the degree of integration within the nuclear family and the community.

- Giving up one's first language diminishes the interaction between children and their family and community.

Parents can offer the most effective collaboration in oral language development and in the acquisition of reading and writing skills. So they may better fulfill that role, it is sometimes necessary to help them understand the meaning and importance of those processes.

A good way to attract parents to the school is to offer a creative reading program in which their children can participate. Better yet, parents must be

involved in organizing such a program. The occasion might be a play staged by the children or an evening in which the children sing, recite, and read some of their own stories. Storytelling sessions followed by book displays that would give the parents the opportunity to see models of how they can interact with their children and a book are also excellent.

Once the parents are at the school, the importance of their children having a good command of the mother tongue might be explained to them.

Any doubt the parents may have in this regard should be discussed and dispelled. Then, ways in which they can best help their children might be suggested to them . To encourage their children's oral language development, parents might:

- Ask their children to tell them what they have done in school on a daily basis.

- Encourage their children to share their thoughts and feelings with them. The parents should not feel compelled to offer solutions but they should know that it is important for their children to have someone with whom they can feel close.

- Talk with their children about their own experiences, both current ones and those of their childhood and youth. These experiences will not only enrich their children's lives, but also give the children confidence in sharing their experiences as well.

- Ask their children for suggestions when there is something to be done, bought or repaired. Once the children have expressed their opinions and suggestions, they should be asked to explain their reasons. Their opinions deserve respect.

- Encourage their children to reflect on everyday experiences, including what they see on television, through questions such as: Why did that happen? Could it have turned out differently? What possible solutions can you think of?

- Teach their children songs, sayings, games, and riddles; tell them stories or legends they remember, and, if possible, read their children stories.

If language minority children are to find a role in a highly technological, information-oriented society, if they are to escape from the present statistical predictions, they need to master the art of communication. They need to become truly literate, and develop critical thinking skills.

The purpose of the Creative Reading Method is not to place the burden of our responsibility on children, but rather to liberate them from the feeling of being trapped by unmalleable, self-defeating circumstances. Through actual demonstration and experience, teachers need to give students the confidence that they can improve their present environment, their human relationships, and their emotional responsiveness. If teachers succeed in giving this much to language minority children, they will have succeeded in validating the learning experience for those who might otherwise have found little relevance in the classroom.

Suggestions for Further Study

The Creative Reading Method is being implemented in numerous classrooms throughout the country. Although teachers and students have provided valuable feedback, and although classroom evaluations demonstrate the successful application of the method, no studies have yet been published to show its effectiveness. The inclusion of both quantitative and qualitative data in research on interactive approaches to literacy would be most welcomed. However, standardized tests provide limited information about the role of reading in a child's life, although they are widely used as the basis for the formulation of educational policy. It is therefore desirable to show that interactive approaches also result in improved test scores.

On the other hand, if we practice interactive pedagogy, our research goals will go beyond test scores. If educators want to know whether students are becoming empowered --that is, whether they are acquiring the tools for understanding and analyzing their own experience and for exercising freedom by recognizing that every situation offers various alternatives for action and that they can indeed take charge of their own lives-- a significant research design will be participatory in nature. By engaging the students in dialogue, it will encourage them to reflect critically about themselves, their world, and the place of education in it. If educators are interested in determining the

role of literacy in the students' lives, and whether that role has in any way been modified by an interactive education process, educators would do well to assess the uses students make of libraries, the books they select, and how much they read for enjoyment. If students are invited to reflect on how their literacy skills and their attitudes toward reading affect their own lives, research will go far beyond providing information. It may be a tool for the enrichment of students who would serve as coparticipants in the research process.

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